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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the successful use of student focus groups by the University of Wisconsin--Whitewater Student Health Center to assess marketing strategies for alcohol abuse prevention. The focus group is a group of 13 students who met several times with a facilitator to share perceptions, feelings, and attitudes about alcohol abuse prevention. It is noted that group members reviewed pamphlets, posters, advertisements, slogans, films, and videos. Examples are included of which verbal, written, and visual approaches were most appealing to them. Four ideas for alcohol abuse prevention recommended by the focus group as being potentially effective with college students are presented: (1) using graphic portrayals of the results of a drunk driving accident; (2) emphasizing the importance of protecting a friend; (3) advertising the costs of alcohol abuse; and (4) showing how to have fun without alcohol or that drinking moderately was acceptable. It is concluded that the use of focus groups demonstrates to students the importance of their opinions, that the focus group is a proven marketing tool, and that focus groups provide an easy and inexpensive way to gather important information on the feelings and attitudes of college students. (Author/NB)

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WHAT COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE TELLING US ABOUT ALCOHOL ABUSE PREVENTION

by Jeanne A. Griffith, M.D., M.P.H.
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Abstract:

Focus groups have been used successfully by the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Student Health Center to assess marketing strategies. Representative students met several times with a facilitator to share perceptions, feelings, and attitudes about a defined topic—in this case alcohol abuse prevention. They reviewed pamphlets, posters, advertisements, slogans, films, and videos. They indicated which verbal, written, and visual approaches were most appealing.

Problem:

Fifteen to twenty-four-year-old young people are the only group in the United States that has a rising death rate. Alcohol-related accidents are the leading cause of death for this group. (Surgeon General, Healthy People, 1979). These statistics plus survey findings on our campus make prevention a major concern. The legal drinking age in Wisconsin was 19 until September 1986. At that time it was raised to 21 for all under 19 years of age at that date.

The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UW-W) is located in a small rural community. Alcohol abuse is a problem on our campus. In a survey responded to by 489 UW-W students in the spring of 1985, 94% indicated that

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they consumed alcoholic beverages. The majority drank in bars or night clubs. Of those who drank, 70% drank more than two drinks per week. Twenty-one percent (21%) admitted to driving a car when they had had too much to drink. Sixteen percent (16%) had a sexual relationship while drinking that they later regretted. Fifty percent (50%) perceived a drinking problem among students at UW-W.

Project:

We wished to design multi-media marketing to deliver three messages: (1) "You don't have to drink to have fun;" (2) "If you choose to drink, drink responsibly;" and (3) "Don't drink and drive." The plan was to use a combination of advertisements, films, videos, public service announcements, posters, residence hall programs, and brochures. A multi-media approach is recommended in social marketing and has been used successfully on this campus.

Focus groups had been used previously by the Student Health Center to design effective marketing approaches. A focus group consists of representative clients who meet several times with a facilitator to elicit reactions to a new product or program. Clients are involved actively in identifying the acceptability and efficacy of various strategies. Focus groups are an economical and efficient way to pre-test a program. Focus groups assess subjective responses--feelings, perceptions, and attitudes--in a peer group setting which is a powerful milieu for college students. The data is qualitative rather than quantitative and allows the respondents to offer valuable information that might not have been included in a survey instrument.

The focus group consisted of 13 students of whom six were females and seven were males. Four students were in the first year of school, four were

sophomores, two were juniors, and three were seniors. Students living on and off campus were represented. Members were recruited for the focus group through flyers, advertisements, and residence hall contacts.

Students were not paid but refreshments were served and they had the satisfaction of having their opinions heard and valued. Members knew we previously had made purchasing decisions based on focus group responses. The group met with the Coordinator of Health Awareness Programs from the Student Health Center for three two-hour weekly sessions in February 1986. The facilitator had specific objectives for each session. All sessions were videotaped with the permission of the participants.

Results:

The focus group recommended four ideas for alcohol abuse prevention that they believed would be effective with college students. The first was the use of graphic portrayals of the results of a drunk driving accident. They preferred accident scene posters and felt "the gorier the better." They felt the film "Just Another Friday Night" was very believable. It showed the events leading up to and the aftermath of an accident. They also suggested designing an ad with an accident scene with the words, "But I only had a few beers." They preferred this slogan to "If you drink a lot of beer, you drink a lot" which they believed was overused.

We are allowed free space for "fillers" in our campus newspaper each week. These are one or two line messages. One of the favorites of the focus group was "Drinking and driving can be murder."

A second idea was emphasizing the importance of protecting a friend. Posters and ads with the slogans "Drinking and Driving Can Kill a Friendship" and "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" were the most popular. Students

also liked the Designated Driver program in Whitewater. The local bars give free non-alcoholic drinks to an individual wearing a Designated Driver button who comes with a group and remains alcohol free all night. The buttons were considered important.

Money is a major motivating force for college students. This is used to advantage in bar ads in our campus newspaper which emphasize the most alcohol for the least money. The third idea, based on these facts, was to advertise the costs of alcohol abuse. They told the facilitator of a public service announcement produced by the Wisconsin Office of Highway Safety that caught their attention. It shows all the goods one could lose from a drunk driving conviction. A car, stereo, skis, and other common properties disappear from the TV screen. They also liked "Is It Worth The Price?" an illustrated graph of things equal to the total cost of a drunk driving conviction (for example: one year of college, 914 movies, 119 pairs of jeans, etc.).

The brochure "Facts About Wisconsin's New Drunk Driving Law" was favored because it contained a graph showing actual penalties. "Wouldn't It Be A Pain," a poster showing a young couple sitting on the gravel at a drive-in movie, was also considered effective. Favorite newspaper fillers were: "Hit the books, not the bottle;" "Nobody ever woke up regretting having had one too few;" and "I'm saving ALL my brain cells for science."

The fourth idea centered on learning to have fun without alcohol or that drinking moderately was acceptable. The group liked the fillers "The myth is crumbling. You don't have to get drunk to have fun;" "I'm a lover, not a drinker;" "I'd rather nuzzle than guzzle;" and "Liquor is quicker, but I'm in no hurry." They chose brochures featuring cheap party food recipes, non-alcoholic drink recipes, and party activity ideas.

Focus group members identified printed materials they would likely pick up and look through. These materials had the following characteristics: bright colors, big headlines, serif type, humorous illustrations, simple drawings, graphs, lists of do's and don't's, questionnaires with immediate feedback, concise text, gadgets, and stapled booklets or sheets in a three-fold design.

They disliked flat sheets, lengthy text, and being referred to as a teenager or alcoholic. If they liked one booklet from a series they would be more likely to read the rest from that same series rather than pick another design.

They recommended "real people telling real stories" for effective educational programs--programs by recovering student alcoholics or survivors of drunk driving accidents. The testimonial format was considered effective in the film "Kevin's Story."

Other preferred avenues of communication were the campus newspaper advertisements and fillers, films on the campus cable TV, interviews such as one with a judge discussing drunk driving penalties, films with class discussions, films with residence hall discussions, posters on campus (especially in stairways), age-appropriate public service announcements before and after feature films on campus cable TV, and periodic distribution of brochures in the residence halls.

Most felt that the packet of brochures traditionally given to first year students as they checked into their residence halls would be read. The Health Center uses this packet each fall for several brochures.

Conclusion

The focus group process demonstrates to the students the importance the Student Health Center places on student opinions and is a proven marketing tool. It is an easy and inexpensive way to gather important information on the feelings and attitudes of college students.

MATERIALS CHOSEN BY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Brochures

About Alcoholism. Channing L. Bete, 200 State Road, South Deerfield, MA. 01373. .50¢.

About Women and Alcohol. Channing L. Bete. .50¢.

Someone Close Drinks Too Much. National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information, P. O. Box 2345, Rockville, Maryland 20852. Publication #76-23. May be reproduced.

Alcohol: Know the Facts. Wisconsin Clearinghouse, 1954 E. Washington Avenue, Madison, WI 53704. .30¢.

Life of the Party Pack. National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information. 50 free.

Questions to Ask About Your Drinking. National Council on Alcoholism, Inc., 733 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10017. May be reproduced.

Posters

Drinking and Driving Can Kill a Friendship. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590. No charge.

Wouldn't It Be A Pain. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. No charge.

Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. No charge.

Three Sheets to the Wind. Wisconsin Department of Transportation, Document Sales, 3617 Pierstorff Street, P. O. Box 7713, Madison, Wisconsin 53707-7713. No charge.

Make Mine a Double. Wisconsin Office of Highway Safety. . No charge.

Graduating at the Bottom of the Glass. Wisconsin Office of Highway Safety. No charge.

Films

Kevin's Story, New Day Films, 22 Riverview Drive, Wayne, N. J. 07470. $375.

Just Another Friday Night. AAA Foundation For Traffic Safety, 8111 Gatehouse Road, Falls Church, Virginia 22047. $75.

Calling the Shots, Cambridge Documentary Films, P.O. Box 385, Cambridge, MA. 02139. $555.

All prices are approximate. Check for current prices and shipping and handling fees.